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Hairstyles and Heretics: Exploring the Backgrounds and Applications of 1 Timothy

MARY ELLEN PEREIRA

The letter of 1 Timothy has fascinated and perplexed me for a number of years. Why would Paul include comments about women's hairstyles in a letter that instructs Timothy to confront heretical teachings in Ephesus? What do prayers for government officials have to do with financial support of poorer relatives? And how can the same scripture that is concerned about demonstrating love in speech and conduct also condemn those who forbid marriage as conscience-seared, hypocritical liars?

I am particularly interested in understanding why Paul includes these far-ranging topics in his correspondence with a young colleague. But I am even more interested in understanding how the letter's cultural-historical backgrounds might shed brighter light on our applications of this scripture.

THE SITUATION

The letter is set in the mid-60s A.D., soon after Paul sends Timothy to deal with some problems among Christians in Ephesus, capital of the Roman province of Asia. Although it is clear that Timothy's responsibilities focus on correcting false doctrine (1 Tim 1:3), nothing in Paul's initial summary discloses the content of the troublesome teaching.

The only clear statement regarding the content of the heresy is found near the beginning of chapter four. Here, Paul points out that the Holy Spirit had warned that apostasy would come (4:1). The prophecy shifts to the present tense of Timothy's assignment as the heresy is finally described: marriage is being forbidden and certain foods are prohibited (4:3). With these scant details, we cannot associate the controversial doctrine with a particular sect. Such prohibitions were characteristic of numerous religious and philosophical groups of the time.

Neither does the text identify the particular food in question. Diverse beliefs among Christians concerning foods were evident as early as the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:20), the confrontation at Antioch between Paul and Cephas (Gal 2:11-14), and the Corinthian disagreements over eating meat (1 Cor 8:4-13; 10:25-33). Any number of foodstuffs could be viable candidates involved in this heresy, but none seems to justify the letter's anxiety relating to leaders, wealth, and household concerns.

CELIBACY AND THE STATE

The presence of church leaders who are explicitly forbidding marriage, however, warrants the intense response we see in 1 Timothy. In the first century, absolute rejection of marriage would be perceived as a hostile threat against the Roman Empire and its society. Because of the populace's widespread disinterest in marriage and childbearing, Caesar Augustus had established laws requiring marriage and rewarding parents for producing children.¹ His legislation continued to be upheld by successive emperors with the support of the senate until it was finally abolished in 320 A.D. during the reign of Constantine.

Under the Augustan marriage legislation, celibacy was strictly prohibited for men between the ages of 25 and 60 and for women between the ages of 20 and 50. In Paul's day, citizens who were widowed within

these age spans were required to remarry within two years; divorced persons were only allowed 18 months. Those who refused were prohibited from receiving certain inheritances, heavily taxed, and passed over for civic privileges. Even then, many ignored these incentives to marry and produce children for the state.

The Roman marriage legislation did not apply equally to all inhabitants of the empire. In the provincial cities, such as Ephesus, the legislation applied particularly to Roman citizens, and then perhaps only to the wealthy. For the noncitizens, many provinces enforced their own regional marriage ordinances that tended to impose even greater penalties than the Augustan legislation. In Iconium, for example, there is evidence of an ordinance that could enforce the death penalty against those who rejected marriage in the mid-first century.²

Stories from the *Apocryphal Acts* consistently associate the first-century martyrdoms of Christian teachers and the apostles with the accusations that they required new converts to remain celibate. If unmarried, they were to reject marriage. If married, they were to abstain from sexual relations in the marriage. According to these stories, women converts (whether married or single) who chose celibacy were subjected to violent anger and threats of horrible deaths. Family members—including husbands, fiancés, and mothers—often initiated the brutal proceedings against them. Further, the Christian teachers who forbade marriage were put to death by torture. Although some of the details of these martyrdoms may be disputed, they still provide a significant portrayal of the danger that attended Christian celibacy in that period.

We must remember that Timothy and the other original recipients of Paul's letter were in Ephesus, a city of residence for the Roman procurator (an ex-consul) of Asia, a senatorial province of Rome. The city was home to a significant number of Roman citizens and maintained close ties to Rome. The Ephesian Christians would be acutely aware of social pressures, if not the legal requirements, to conform to Roman norms for marriage in order to avoid identification as a subversive group. In this setting, Paul, Timothy, and other believers would certainly face serious danger regarding the Ephesian Christians' practice of forbidding marriage.

It is not clear whether the recipients of 1 Timothy were subject to the Augustan marriage legislation for citizens or to local ordinances that forbade celibacy, such as found in Iconium. Regardless of the applicability of laws, the recipients of 1 Timothy lived in the midst of a society that exerted severe pressures against celibacy.

The consequences of an anti-marriage stance went far beyond penalties relating to inheritances or taxes and threatened the core of the empire itself. From the early years of the Roman republic, the individual household was perceived to be a microcosm of the state. Musonius Rufus, an influential philosopher during the time of Paul, taught that "whoever destroys human marriage destroys the home, the city, and the whole human race" (*Or.* 14; 92.35-6 Lutz). In the Roman Empire, marriage and proper household management were matters of the state, comparable to 21st century American concerns regarding "homeland security."

Because of this fundamental relationship between household and state, Rome had established a code of "household management" that regulated four areas of household life: the husband-wife relationship, the master-slave relationship, the parent-child relationship, and the proper use of wealth. Attempts to change the inequality of these relationships, evidence of the love of money, or rejection of marriage and childbearing were considered to be particularly seditious acts against the state (e.g., Arius Didymus 151,9-13; Hierocles 4:22.21-24, 4:24.14). An individual's compliance in even the smallest household mattered to the stability of the empire.

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The situation described in 1 Timothy indicates that the Ephesian Christians were inviting serious suspicions of disloyalty to the state because of the obvious presence of teachers who forbade marriage. There are indications in the letter that Paul recognized the presence of slanderers who were eager to inform against the believers. In fact, he named the dangers that he hoped to prevent through his instructions: accusations from slanderers (*diabolos*; 3:6,7), perceptions that the group rejected standards of common human decency (5:8), derision from enemies (5:14), and blasphemy against God's name and the church's teaching (6:1).

Because the anti-marriage teachings promoted by some of the Ephesian leaders would place not only the local believers but also the wider church under suspicion of sedition, Paul's response needed to deal directly with the issues at stake:

1. Does Christianity forbid marriage?
2. Does the church condone sedition by rejecting cultural codes of household management?

If his letter were heeded, it would not only be clear that the Christians rejected anti-marriage doctrine, but that they were actually exemplary citizens who practiced proper household codes and the highest virtues of their society.

PAUL'S RESPONSE

Paul, a Roman citizen who was also a prominent leader in a religious cult that most Romans despised, clarified that he was not disloyal to the emperor and his laws. Instead, he opposed believers who forbade marriage, declaring that such people had renounced the faith and followed deceiving spirits, demons, and hypocritical liars (4:1-2). Instead, he pointed out that God himself was the creator of marriage and that believers could receive it with thanksgiving (4:3).

Finally, Paul took public action against Hymenaeus and Alexander, two teachers in Ephesus who promoted the false doctrine, whom he "handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme" (1:20 NIV).

Although expulsion of these leaders and denunciation of their doctrine was an important response, this would not fully resolve the tension and suspicions that the anti-marriage doctrine had created for the church. Paul's letter incorporated commands that not only guided the Christians toward exemplary behavior in their society but also provided an apologetic to counter any slanderers who were poised to inform against the believers as adherents of a dangerously subversive cult. Like other writers of this period who were pressed to defend their religious groups against accusations of subversion, Paul portrayed the Christians as a group that adhered to proper household management and incorporated the virtue of *eusebeia* in their lives.³

So we find that one of the unique characteristics of 1 Timothy is its frequent use of the term *eusebeia* and its cognates. Paul discussed *eusebeia* in very significant sections of the letter, specifically at the beginning and end of the sections devoted to instructions for the church (2:2 and 3:16), near the beginning of the personal admonitions for Timothy (4:7,8), and in the final concerns of the letter (6:3,5,6,11). Paul also employed related forms at 1 Tim 1:9, 2:10, and 5:4.

Although *eusebeia* was honored as the highest virtue in Greco-Roman society, encompassing loyalty in a variety of relationships, English translations of the term usually render it as "godliness," "reverence," or "religion." The Romans, however, understood it as *reciprocal loyalty* between humans and deities, emperors and ordinary people, benefactors and clients, in addition to family and friends. Further, *eusebeia* was expressed in a variety of actions and beliefs, including such diverse examples as adhering to correct doctrines (especially concerning a deity), respecting government authority, caring for parents, and exemplifying proper household roles. In contrast, persons formally charged with treason against Rome during this period of time were often designated as *asebes*⁴ (cf. 1 Tim 1:9, where to render it as "ungodly" or "impious" may be misleading).

In this setting, Paul used the core standards of Roman society to correct the suspicion that the church was seditious and to protect the believers from torture or death. He expressed an expectation that Christians would live in *eusebeia* and urged the believers to manifest this virtue toward civil authorities by offering various types of prayers on their behalf (2:1-2). He also required believers to show *eusebeia* in their general relationships by treating older people with the respect given to parents and treating younger people as brothers or sisters (5:1-2). The instructions demonstrated a basic attitude of *eusebeia*, or loyalty, toward government and society.

Paul insisted that *eusebeia* was not in conflict with any doctrine received from Jesus Christ (6:3). He argued, instead, that the acclaim of Jesus by earthly and heavenly witnesses was proof that he was actually the great exemplar of the church's *eusebeia* (3:16). As a minister of the church, Timothy was to intentionally pursue *eusebeia* in addition to righteousness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness (6:11), for it would be of value in both the present and the future life of the Christian (4:7).

Other portions of 1 Timothy admonished the Christians to comply with the established code of household management esteemed in their culture. These instructions would not only guide the believers as they lived in Roman society but also would provide a clear description of the relationship roles that would be officially endorsed in the Ephesian church. Because rejection of these norms was considered to be seditious, compliance would help alleviate unjustified suspicions of disloyalty against the state.

All four elements of the household code (husband-wife relationship, master-slave relationship, parent-child relationship, and use of wealth) were addressed in 1 Timothy, suggesting that each of these components was related to details involved in the actual situation at Ephesus. Paul's instructions promoted marriage, particularly for leaders of the group (3:2,12), and remarriage for any widows under the age of 60 (5:9-14). Little direct attention was given to husbands. Instead, Paul addressed the duties of a wife, emphasizing her subordination and modest adornment (2:8-14). Procreation was assumed to be a goal of marriage (2:15; 3:4,12; 5:14).

Instructions were given to slaves under the assumption that their respectful attitudes and behaviors toward masters would prevent blasphemy of God's name and the Church's doctrine (6:1-2). The responsibilities of masters were not discussed in the letter.

Adult children were obligated to provide financial support to older relatives in need (5:4), a principle in keeping with the Roman code of household management. Anyone who failed to fulfill this duty was considered to have denied the faith and was denounced as worse than an unbeliever (5:8). The role of the father was reflected in the admonition that public leaders in the church were to manage their households well, training their children to be submissive and respectful (3:4,12).

Much attention was given to the topic of wealth, the final element in the code of household management. Paul warned against the love of money, which was regarded as evidence of sedition in traditional household codes (6:10). The wealthy were cautioned against arrogance and urged to use their money to benefit others (6:17-18). Those trying to become rich were instructed to be content instead with the necessities of life (6:6-10).

Although sumptuary laws of this period restricted displays of extravagance for both genders, women were under additional pressures to avoid the appearance of luxury. Already assumed to be guilty of the love of money, lavishly adorned women were also assumed to be guilty of adultery. Both were considered to be acts of sedition against the state. Christian women were not to use their wealth for expensive clothing, lavish jewelry, or ornate hairstyles—displays that were specifically associated with marital unfaithfulness and subversion against the state (2:9). Instead, Paul expected them to use their wealth for benefactions (2:10; cf. 6:18).

First Timothy urged compliance with the code of household management, with more severe restrictions placed on women in contrast to men. Although this may seem unusual to cultures that assume the equality of

men and women, we must remember that the Romans did not allow the equality of women. From the time of Aristotle, change to the unequal status of women was seen as a direct threat to the state (*Pol* 2.1270a.12-15). Arius Didymus, a philosopher and advisor to Caesar Augustus, further taught that two of the most common causes of sedition were rooted in giving equality to those who were unequal (e.g., women and slaves) and in the love of money for personal use (Arius 151,9-13).

The laws and cultural norms that permeated the Ephesian situation were deeply established by the time of this letter. The household was not a private sphere but was regulated in such a way as would benefit the empire. Rejection of the household management code or the Augustan marriage legislation was perceived as evidence of sedition and could be punished with death.

Because of the group's ill-informed forbiddance of marriage—a doctrine that was not theologically justified—they were placing the church at risk. The Ephesian Christians could relieve the danger to the group only by demonstrating their acceptance of marriage, their respect for Roman household management codes, and their exemplary embodiment of *eusebeia*.

OUR APPLICATION

A close look at 1 Timothy in light of its cultural-historical backgrounds reveals a complexity that is not apparent at the surface of the letter. This should warn us to be cautious about oversimplified applications of the letter for other cultural settings, including ours. With that said, I still want to suggest some directions for us to consider as we seek to know how to apply this scripture to our lives and circumstances.

Asceticism Is Not Always Godly

It may be easy for us to see that the Ephesian Christians were wrong to forbid marriage and certain foods. Like Paul said, God himself had created both—how can we claim that they are forbidden to believers? It may be more difficult for us to notice, however, that 1 Timothy also urges us away from a more insidious asceticism: withdrawal from the various social relationships that surround us.

Obviously, 1 Timothy does not permit an anti-marriage doctrine. But it does not permit social asceticism either. We need to fully embrace our relationships as citizens, family members, and community benefactors.

Christians Are Expected To Live Exemplary Lives in their Society

It would be nice to think that our lives mattered only to God. But the reality is that our reputations among outsiders also matter. A poor work ethic or disrespectful attitude toward a boss can cause others to speak against God and his church. Problems in our family relationships can expose us to slander as the family of God. Disobedience toward our government can invite accusations that result in legal actions against believers. Although we do not need to be controlled by others' opinions, we can be sensitive to them and do our best to live peacefully with others.

At Times, Exigencies May Need To Overrule Freedoms Enjoyed in Other Circumstance

In this letter, Paul was compelled to restrict certain freedoms that were maintained in other times or places. Several years earlier, Paul taught that marriage and celibacy were matters of personal choice for believers in Corinth (1 Corinthians 7). But in 1 Timothy, marriage was the only option.

Years before Timothy arrived, Paul left Priscilla and Aquila on assignment in Ephesus where they tutored Apollos, a man who was already a well-known preacher. But in 1 Timothy, women were not permitted to teach. In Corinth, women were allowed to pray and prophesy. But at this time in Ephesus, women were instructed to learn in quietness and full submission.

Freedoms that had been enjoyed in the church at other times and other places were not allowed here because the lives of Christians were at risk and the church was being maligned by slanderers. Like the

believers in Ephesus, we may find that certain freedoms—especially when they are perceived as sedition—must be given up when we live in hostile cultures.

Christian Freedoms Must Not Be Imposed as Requirements of the Faith

Although the choice between marriage and celibacy could be a personal option according to 1 Corinthians 7, the teachers at Ephesus were entirely mistaken to take their preference (celibacy) and require it of all believers. Like many other issues, marriage and celibacy were equal freedoms that could be enjoyed by Christians. The errors of the Ephesian teachers can remind us not to hold our personal preferences so strongly that we mistakenly teach them as requirements of the faith.

Hairstyles Matter!

Our “religious” life cannot be separated from the “secular” sphere. This letter expects one’s profession of reverence toward God (2:10) to be reflected not only through worship but also through such diverse expressions as prayer for civil authorities, family relationships, use of wealth, and even our choice of hair-styles!

Non-Christians watch us and form an impression of God and his church through what they see in our behaviors—including how we use our money. Our claims of devotion to God seem grossly out of place if we are devoted to expensive clothes or the latest hairstyles. We are urged to express our relationship to God in all areas of life, generously sharing with others. Then we will take hold of the life that truly is life.

GOD’S PURPOSE

Perhaps the key to all of the instructions in 1 Timothy lies in Paul’s comment at 2:2. Immediately after expressing his hope that Christians would live peaceful and quiet lives in all *eusebeia* and holiness, Paul reminded us of God’s reason for all of this. God, our Savior, wants all people to be saved (2:3-4).

If our behaviors cause outsiders to slander the church or blaspheme God’s name, how will they accept God’s salvation? Like it or not, how we live within our society affects whether others will come to believe in Christ for eternal life.

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END NOTES

- 1 Leo Ferrero Raditsa, “Augustus’ Legislation Concerning Marriage, Procreation, Love Affairs and Adultery,” *ANRW* 13:278-339. See also Judith Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 94-112.
- 2 “Acts of Paul and Thecla” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, (rev. ed.; Cambridge: Clarke, 1992), 2:239-46.
- 3 David L. Balch, “Two Apologetic Encomia: Dionysius on Rome and Josephus on the Jews,” *JSJ* 13 (1982): 102-22.
- 4 Richard A. Bauman, *Impietas in Principem* (Munich: Beck’sche, 1974), 3-4.

